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Interview with Barry Mazur, New York

M: "This may sound funny, but I still think of you as young."

E: I know what you mean, or rather, I think I know what you probably feel. I still feel, from the inside, young, much of the time. Till I look in the mirror, and see what other people see.

...I just turned 65, last week. But when people ask me, How does it feel, being old, I say, I've felt old for a long time. When I was in Vietnam in 1967, I felt old. I was 36. It was a dismaying, disheartening...depressing time, and I felt old.

M: I hadn't realized you were in the Armed Services.

E: I was a Marine in the 50's, I was proud of the fact--I still am proud--that I was a rifle company commander, I was the only first lieutenant in the Second Marine Division at Camp Lejeune who had a rifle company, for several months. In many ways those months were the happiest time of my life. Then when I went to Vietnam, I was a civilian in the State Department. But I was less than ten years from being a Marine infantryman, so I used my Marine training to go out into the field evaluating pacification, which meant walking with troops in combat conditions, Vietnamese and American troops. I had a chance to try out my Marine training in combat, being shot at a lot by the Vietcong. I found that my training had been very realistic, very good.

M: I was in the Second World War. I had the idea that when your country called you, you went. When Muhammad Ali refused to go, I didn't react like Howard Cosell, I thought he was wrong....

M: I talked to Hubert Humphrey when he had just gotten back from Vietnam. ...

E: that may have been just after I met with him. February 1966?

M: No, this was in June...in 1967.

E: Ah, that must have been his second trip. I came back in June 1967.

M: He was totally upbeat, optimistic. And I have always wondered, How did we come to take over from the French, after they were defeated there? Why did we carry on that fight?

E: Well, I think I have part of the answer to that. Let's look at your experience with Humphrey. I had just left in June 1967, I

think I know what information he would have gotten then. I certainly know what the situation was, and I think he would have gotten a realistic picture. (? Well, Komer knew: he had just arrived, and he had just lied to the press; I knew what the province reports were).

Humphrey was simply lying to you. He was telling you what his President wanted you to here. He was being a good soldier, playing follow the leader. Go back to early 1965. Hubert Humphrey was Vice President, a man who knew politics as well as Lyndon Johnson. He was one of the original Cold Warriors; he had introduced a bill to outlaw the Communist Party, under Harry Truman. Remember that? He was as anti-Communist as they come. Just like me; my career had been spent fighting Communists, I went to Vietnam in hopes of beating the Communists. [Of snatching a victory away from them--now that the President had made a total, open-ended commitment, whether or not I thought he should have done that. At the least, of fuzzing up their victory.]

So in January of 1965, Humphrey told the President, in a memo that we have now: "You have the best chance of any President in history of cutting our losses, in a situation like this, of pulling out. The Republicans are in disarray, after that landslide defeat, they can't challenge you; and the public has just voted a referendum against wider American involvement in the war. There will be costs to getting out, but they will be manageable, and the costs in every respect will be much greater later. You should get out."

And Johnson wouldn't speak to Humphrey for months. He wouldn't let him into meetings, wouldn't consult. So Humphrey came around.

[Compare: identical to my treatment by Mother when I tried to quit the piano. Identical to my treatment by the "clearance community" when I gave the Papers; but then I had another community to be part of, which I was ready to join.] ]

[The threat of isolation, of ostracism, of abandonment by Mother: the basis of shame.] ]

[Ali, too, acted as part of a community, a new one for him: the Black Muslims. Did they all refuse to go? In any case, he wasn't deterred or brought around by the experience of abandonment and even by the loss of his brilliant career, and the threat of prison.] ]

E:...in 1968, on the day of his announcement of his campaign in New York, Humphrey offered me a job, to work on the Vietnam aspects of his campaign. He held a lunch at the Waldorf Astoria, with a bunch of people--including, another name from the past, Zbigniew Brzezinski. Another little touch of pride for me, I was the only

one offered a job right after that lunch...  
[\mem\Humphrey story]

M: So...LBJ didn't want to be the first President to lose a war.

E: No President wanted to lose that war...[so tens of thousands of Americans and hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese lost their lives, to no other purpose than to postpone that loss, by a few years].

The Vietcong couldn't bring about their own military victory in any one year. We could always keep going another year. But they were willing to wait, because they lived there, it was their country, and they counted on Americans getting tired of having sons die in Vietnam eventually, thousands of miles from home, and they would bring them back. [Vietnamese nationalists, Communist-led, were ready to die in almost unlimited numbers waiting for that, holding open that prospect--killing enough Americans every year to bring that closer--and their leaders were willing to encourage and exploit that readiness.]

So the question was, how long would that take? When would it be that an American President would act on that realization: that we were not likely ever to win, that it was too costly to keep trying and to postpone the withdrawal, that it was time to throw in the towel?

How many prizefighters show the costs of their trainers being unwilling to throw in the towel? Back to Muhammad Ali: [a great American hero, a very, very smart fighter and talker, quick, witty, creative...] living now with the effects of fighting too long, of someone's not throwing in the towel. Tragically punch-drunk. [Like American society. And for many years, France, after Indochina and Algeria, Russia after Afghanistan. Results of quitting, losing, or of getting in and then not getting out quickly enough?]

[It occurs to me during a commercial break: In our American obsession with sports analogies, with team spirit and fighting in sports to win, to be #1, we miss a difference between most sports contests and wars. There is no set rule in a war for ending it. There is no time-clock, no set number of sets or innings. It is more like the old-style fight-to-the-finish boxing match, where it goes on till one player is totally incapacitated or gives up.

Now, when a football or basketball or baseball team is being beaten, even when it is clear that defeat is inevitable (there is no way for the score to be reversed in the remaining time), or the same is true in a race or an Olympic event, there is no incentive or advantage to quitting before the game or event is due to end. The humiliation would be even greater; the shame of quitting would simply be added to the shame of losing. (The exception is chess,

where the losing player gets the credit for foreseeing with confidence the inevitability of his own defeat, which takes special expertise). And there is no permanent cost to the effort of making a gallant, doomed try. There may be injuries, but not death, and rarely permanent damage: only effort and pain, with a limit, an end, in sight. There is every incentive to bear that, on the chance that a miracle may happen, and in order to demonstrate that your team is willing to bear that in order to gain a slim chance of being a winner, to demonstrate that your team has the psychological capability and determination to be winners even against great odds.

The exception to this is boxing, where the price of continuing too long in a hopeless contest (and sometimes even in one where there is some hope of winning) may be irreversible brain damage, even death. That's why boxing allows formally for the option of a team-member who is not on the field ending the contest short of its appointed time, by throwing in the towel.

Obviously, a trainer or manager doesn't want to do this, unnecessarily or prematurely, when the hope of winning outweighs the danger and costs of injury or death...in the eyes of the fighter himself, and perhaps still more, in the eyes of his backers and bettors. Neither the fighter nor the trainers want to take the blame for taking the loss, a loss that might conceivably have been avoided, for being a quitter. Yet the option is there, and it is used, sometimes very controversially.

When should a President throw in the towel? When should an advisor advise him to do so? Or a fighter?

That was the problem that JFK and LBJ and Nixon faced; and Kissinger and McNamara; and Harkins and Westmoreland and Abrams, and the JCS. And the Congress, the media, the public.

None of them acted very well. They didn't do it too soon. Or at all (except for the public and Congress, and some of the media; with exceptions that either reversed themselves when the President rejected their advice, like Clifford in 1965 and Humphrey even earlier, or left or were forced out of the government in silence when they finally gave this advice, like McNamara in 1967, Ball earlier). Our society still shows the damage to our psyches.

The analogy is sound. It shows the difficulty of the decision, at best, and sometimes the necessity for it, but why it may be postponed too long. But the difficulty of the decision in wartime and the likelihood that it will be put off too long, at ghastly cost, is greater than it might be otherwise precisely because this correct analogy to boxing is not generally perceived, and the President is judged by a false analogy to sporting events where there is no great risk of permanent injury to the team or spectators or even to individual players, where the end is prescribed by the rules eventually (not by the decision of any

player or manager) and where there is no tradition, no ethos, no provision for ending the game before the impersonal rules demand it, no incentive to do so, and every prospect of total humiliation for attempting it. (See the demand and the response by the public to "support the troops" in the Gulf War, even before the ground war had commenced and while it could still have been averted: when this meant sending them into a possibly-unnecessary likelihood of being slaughtered, not merely beaten or cheated of total victory).

The wrong metaphor: of basketball or a footrace, not boxing. Quitting, not throwing in the towel. ]

M: Did you ever think you made the wrong decision?

E: Well, to go back, I think I made the wrong decision in 1964, when I kept my mouth shut while an election was being stolen on the basis of lies about what we were up to. I was wrong in 1965, and 1966 and 1967, while I kept silent, like Humphrey, while men were being lied to death. But I've never thought I was wrong in 1969, when I gave the truth to Congress, or, when they didn't act on that, when I gave it to the press in 1971. Even though I thought I would go to jail for the rest of my life for doing.

I had learned finally what Muhammad Ali [who hadn't yet been brain-damaged, and hadn't been exposed to the brain-numbing "inside dope" that I'd been fed in the early Sixties] knew earlier. That there are times when you should say "No" to a President, even if you have to face jail for it.

[Muhammad Ali is as much my hero now for his refusal to step over the line, at the cost of his title and his career, as for anything he did in the ring. He deserves to be seen as a hero for that, by whites as he is by blacks, and it would be good for this country if he were. Let him be the symbol of the antiwar movement: say, at the antiwar memorial someday.]